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Candace Havens  
Director

## MEMORANDUM

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**DATE:** October 24, 2014


**TO:** Alderman Marcia T. Johnson, Chairman  
Members of the Zoning and Planning Committee

**FROM:** James Freas, Acting Director of Planning and Development

**RE:** #80-13: THE PLANNING DEPARTMENT requesting update discussions of the zoning reform project.

**MEETING DATE:** October 27, 2014

**CC:** Board of Aldermen  
Planning and Development Board  
Donnalyn Kahn, City Solicitor



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Newton is in many ways a remarkable City. Thirteen distinct village centers with an appealing mix of historic homes and commercial buildings coupled with a range of neighborhoods offering distinct housing choices, the City is diverse and attracts a diversity of people. Coupled with many transportation choices, light rail, commuter rail, bus, bikes, and cars, and an extensive park system and cultural offerings, it is a City that represents many ideals. The challenge in this ideal environment is two-fold – how do we preserve and protect all that we value in this place while at the same time, how do we adapt to our ever changing world? How do we prepare for the changing diversity of our City and the different needs that presents? How do we respond to the growing demand to live or open a business in Newton given its location and the amenities offered? The answer is to have a plan, to understand the City as it exists today and the trends towards the future we currently see, to engage our citizens in an exploration of ideas and solutions, and to decide on a course of action and a policy and regulatory framework.

We propose to address this challenge through a Village and Neighborhood Master Planning program. This program will be design-based, seeking to comprehensively define a vision for areas of villages and neighborhoods that includes transportation, housing, infrastructure, urban design, streetscapes, and land use. The resulting plans will inform an action list of projects as well as the development of new zoning districts and/or modifications to existing zoning. As we move incrementally through this program, new zoning will be submitted for adoption as it is available. What follows is a more detailed

description of the program framework and we look forward to getting feedback from the Zoning and Planning Committee.

## **VILLAGE AND NEIGHBORHOOD MASTER PLANNING PROGRAM**

Overall the Village and Neighborhood Master Planning Program is an ambitious effort to plan for the future of the City in a way that provides sufficient specificity to identify concrete actions and regulatory changes. As is noted frequently throughout the following program description, this work must include robust community engagement as such dialogue is essential to the creation of plans that will work. Realizing this planning program will require the support of a team of consultants with specialization in design and land use, transportation, zoning, and other areas, our most immediate next step will be to issue a request for proposals (RFP). While the sections below describe our preliminary framework for this program, much of the detail will come as we select a consultant team and benefit from the experience and knowledge they bring to optimizing this process. The entire planning program builds on, and is consistent with, that described in the Zoning Reform Group Report.

### Outcomes

An essential first step in any planning exercise is to understand the desired outcomes. In pursuing master plans for the City, what are we hoping to achieve?

- Protect and promote the essential character of Newton's villages and neighborhoods.
- Create diverse housing opportunities that meet the needs of current and future generations in the City.
- Promote village vitality and a successful business climate.
- Advance the City towards a more sustainable future.
- Identify transportation improvements that will enhance mobility options in the City and support our adopted Complete Streets policy.

### Principles

Equally important to the question of what will be achieved is the question of how the planning program will unfold. The following planning principles are intended to serve as a guide to Newton's planning process

1. Engage the community in the decision-making process. The residents and businesses of this community are an integral part of bringing any vision of the future to fruition; they must be part of creating that vision. We do this by following these rules:
  - a. Engage early – seek solutions together, don't present and defend preconceived ideas.
  - b. Listen – create events, online tools, and other engagement opportunities that allow community members and city officials to share ideas and listen to all points of view with an open mind.
  - c. Show your work – the City must always explain the basis for the decisions made.
2. Take a design-based approach – an approach that looks to creative solutions that integrate information and ideas across disciplines.

3. Illustrate and test ideas. The planning process should be iterative, with successive rounds of public feedback and using illustrations and pilots to try out solutions.
4. Data and outcome driven. As part of “showing our work” the solutions identified in the plan should be backed up by data and work towards the desired outcomes. As planned actions are implemented, the results should be tracked allowing for modifications as necessary or desired.

### Master Planning Program Components

There are five primary components to the overall Village and Neighborhoods Master Planning Program.

1. Community Engagement Strategy
2. Neighborhood & Village Master Plans
3. Zoning
4. Transportation and Urban Design “Small Projects”
5. Outside consulting

#### *Community Engagement Strategy*

The very first task is the development of a community engagement strategy encompassing all parts of the overall project and identifying the nature of community engagement activity for each. This strategy should include online, meeting, and event-based engagement methods.

#### *Village & Neighborhood Master Plans*

The core of the overall program is the village and neighborhood master plans encompassing transportation, housing, infrastructure, streetscape, and land use solutions and working towards the outcomes identified above. By working on planning in smaller sections, master planning can be accomplished more efficiently. As the Zoning Reform Group clearly noted, one of Newton’s strengths and an important part of its character is in the uniqueness found in each of its villages, commercial corridors, and neighborhoods. This approach takes into account the unique character of sections of the City. However, these plans must also encompass an understanding of the City as a whole.

#### *Zoning*

The zoning task includes codifying the results of the village and neighborhood master plans into new or modified zoning districts including dimensional standards, use regulations, and other necessary parts while also addressing citywide aspects of the zoning ordinance such as site development standards (stormwater, grading, fences, etc.), parking, the sign ordinance, and other important pieces.

#### *Transportation and Urban Design “Small Projects”*

While engaged in any given Master Plan, there is no reason that other parts of the City should not have the benefit of the expertise available through the consultant team and an opportunity to advance small, discrete projects that support the overall planning program. Through this task, a portion of money would be set aside each year for small projects not associated with the current area of focus at a given time. These projects could include:

- Parking solution analysis;
- Pilots and demonstrations of small scale streetscape or pedestrian/bicycle safety improvements;

- Design solutions for a particular site or development project, public or private;
- Individual zoning ordinance amendments;
- And others as identified

#### *Outside Consulting*

There are two distinct goals in hiring outside consultants: 1) to help plan and staff the village and neighborhood master planning program and 2) to examine the structure and functioning of the Planning Department itself. Both aspects are critical to ensuring the successful completion of the village and neighborhood master planning program, the implementation of the resulting recommendations as master planning proceeds, and alignment of the Planning and Development Department with best practices generally in planning and municipal government.

#### Next Steps and Key Questions

The Planning Department welcomes the Zoning and Planning Committee's comments and questions on the planning program presented above. The Department will be working on finalizing an RFP over the next few weeks utilizing the framework described above.